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Art and Market: A Portrait of the Commercialisation of Visual Arts in Twentieth Century

America in Jane Urquhart's Novel, The Underpainter

Abstract: The paper deals with the study of visual arts in its historical context to understand the role of institutions like art museums, arts discourse, and the arts market in shaping the nature of American art. The Canadian writer, Jane Urquhart's novel *The Underpainter* (1997), which deals with the life of Austin Fraser, an American visual artist, depicts the major trends of the art world during the twentieth century and throws light on the factors that have contributed in the commodification of art during that time. By analysing the text, the paper explores the role of aestheticism that emerged in the second half of nineteenth century in shaping the present scenario in art. It also brings into focus how the aftermath of World Wars changed the trends in American visual art that not only contributed to the development

of art organisations but also to make art a concern of high culture. Simultaneously, the role of ‘Art criticism’ in determining what art museums collect and exhibit, and how the art markets value works of art for sustaining the aesthetic purity of art objects have been explored. The paper analyses as to how Urquhart’s *The Underpainter* depicts the plight of the protagonist Austin Fraser, who is succumbed to the pressures of the art market and moves along with the trend of the time, and later subsequently gets disappointed.

Keywords: Art, Artists, Aestheticism, Society, Economy, Ideology, Institution.

Art became a matter of status, fashion, and investment, in the American visual arts, with a number of American national and international magazines such as *Art in America*, and *Life*, presenting the state of the world through pictures in the twentieth century. The blend of entertainment and edification in the magazines shaped the notion of art in America. Isadora A. Helfgott in “Art in Life” mentions that by presenting the world of art alongside the society party and international events, these magazines made art a normalised aspect of everyday life. She says, by adopting a didactic approach “Life brought art into the realm of mass consumption and politics into the realm of visual culture” (269). And it is a well-known fact that anything that is a part of civilisation, like visual arts, reshapes its purposes, styles, and organisational features when civilisations and their cultures in which they are stemmed in, have undergone changes with time. The modification in the nature of visual arts as the need of time is traced closely by the Canadian writer Jane Urquhart in her novel, *The Underpainter* (1997) that not only depicts the world of visual arts and its theories but meditates on the factors that have subjected the artistic creation to the law of market production. By portraying the fictional characters of visual artists such as Austin Fraser, George Kearns, and Abbott

Thayer, Urquhart throws light on the life's struggle of an artist under the hostile environment created by the art institutions such as art museums, galleries, auction houses, etc.

Noticing the potentiality of artistic production to influence mainstream America, commercial intermediaries like art dealers have actively participated in the promotion of visual arts in the 1940s by advertising the innate potential of art to bring social change in the society. At the same time, migration of many European artists to America (as a result of World War II) has conflated the relationship between art and market by propelling the epicenter of the art market from Paris to New York. This shift of art market establishes the notion in the United States that art needs market to flourish. But there are many art thinkers and scholars like John F Sherry and Annamma Joy, who believe that market is one of the ways to keep eye on the activities of the art world, not an only means for the viewer to judge the value of the art objects. By discarding the existing belief about the art's reliance on the market, Annamma Joy in "Disentangling the Paradoxical Alliances between Art Market and Art World" says, "[a] market orientation is just one way of evaluating the activities of the art world. Art and market are not reducible to each other, no matter the prevailing ideology" (155). A similar conviction in the competence of genuine art to make its own space in the world of art even under the restrictions of the arts market finds expression in Urquhart's *The Underpainter*.

In the novel, *The Underpainter*, the non-commercial artists (like Rockwell Kent, George Kearns, and Abbott Thayer) and their art theories are equally liked and appreciated by the public as they did the commercial artists' works. The popularity of Rockwell Kent among natives is evident in *The Underpainter* when his lecture on "In Defense of True Art" in Whitney Club, has attended by a large number of people. While referring to the gathering of people at the Club, Rockwell says, "They were delightful, believe it, Austin, there is a lover of art at the centre of each bright human spirit. The problem is that most have been

made to feel inadequate, ashamed of their preference” (Urquhart 256). Here, Rockwell indirectly makes his friend Austin realise that an artist should not be ashamed of his preferences, and should be bold to show the world what he wants to say through his pictures. Conscious of the well-known fact that the genuine artists are the one who do not let their works get tainted under the pressure of economy/market, Austin Fraser admits in *The Underpainter* that Rockwell Kent is ‘the real artist’ he ever met in his life as compared to other well established artists of his time. He says, “Besides my teacher and his colleagues, Rockwell Kent was the only real artist I’d ever laid eyes on” (Urquhart 136). Rockwell Kent, like other non-commercial artists such as George Kearns and Abbott Thayer in the novel, has never succumbed to the pressures of market and changed his art and character. Even the commercial artists like Austin Fraser in the novel do appreciate it and hence seek out their company to learn something from them.

Commercialisation of art and its effect on the artist is seen in the novel when the commercial artist, Austin, reflects on his artistic carrier in his old age. Austin realises that much of his artworks seem like a second-hand experience to him. His desire to get instant fame and success in his artistic carrier commercialised his works of art and left him with the feeling of uncertainty in his old age. He says, “I am forced to admit to myself how much of my experience has been second-hand. [...] I was frequently more interested in my own fame and my own interior Arctic” (216). Although one can sense the feeling of incompleteness and uncertainty in Austin Fraser’s life, it is quite evident in *The Underpainter* that an artist’s desire to get fame and success in the world of art is mostly fulfilled by following and yielding to the demands of the art market. Otherwise, he has to struggle throughout his life, like Rockwell Kent, George Kearns, and Abbott Thayer in the novel did, to put his feet on in the world of art. In this way, one can discern the influence of art market on the artistic discourse in the twentieth century America that works complementarily by promoting each other.

The connection between art market and art discourse is not a new phenomenon, but rather, it is a modified version of the connection between art patronages and art appreciation in the earlier eras. While looking at the general history of visual arts, Kevin F. McCarthy in *A Portrait of the Visual Arts* mentions that the oldest of all artistic disciplines such as performing arts, applied arts, conceptual arts, and textile arts, the visual arts was arisen in the early cave drawings of the Neolithic era (9,000 B.C. to 3,000 B.C.). In the earlier eras when art appreciation and art patronages were interlinked, caves, temples, palaces, and cathedrals, were the central venue for the appreciation of art. At that time, wealthy patrons had commissioned the works of art of their likes and shared it in their private viewing galleries. It is in the 19th century that the public museums and art markets have occupied the significant role in selecting/appreciating the works of art. McCarthy says, “The circle of public appreciation widened in the late 19th century as museums began to proliferate and art criticism emerged. Since then, art museums – where art is exposed to a wide public audience – have been central to framing the public’s awareness and experience of art” (9). Urquhart in *The Underpainter* depicts this role of art museums and art critics in promoting as well as rejecting the works of art and the artist. For instance, Austin Fraser recalls the time when critics have written long essays about his works of art and have framed public awareness about his new art forms. Austin says, “It was a critic who came up with the term “erasure” when I first exhibited the series[...] Even those who had been either indifferent or hostile to my work in the past wrote long, reflective essays about the hidden subject matter[...]” (183).

The confluence of the strategies of art markets, the opinions of the art critics and the subsequently rejuvenated interest of the public in art objects helped establish art museums permanently in the nineteenth century. Moreover, it authenticated the field of art that demanded a range of sensibility. It is the growing awareness and interest of the public in the art that helped to break the earlier ties of American museums with the aristocratic households

and turns its attention in the edification of the public. At the same time, the emergence of the aesthetic movement in the mid-nineteenth century Europe, as mentioned in “The Aesthetic Movement,” played a vital role in divorcing art from its didactic obligations marked by the Victorian traditions, and in promoting self-expression by focusing, instead, on the colours, forms, and composition in the pursuit of beauty (1). This transformation in American art has been illustrated in *The Underpainter* when Austin reminds of how his contemporaries prefer experimentation with colours and forms to the didactic and narrative styles of Victorian artists while depicting the American landscapes and their inner self. Austin says, “I remember how my contemporaries hated the narrative in visual art [...] No fresco cycle, no nineteenth-century history painting could convince them otherwise. They scoffed at Giotto, Gericault, David, Goya, Ingres” (160). In this way, the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement sets the stage for the global art movements of the twentieth century.

By shifting the didactic focus of art museums to the aesthetic purity of art, aestheticism denies the earlier conceptions that art serves/fulfills any other purposes in the society. Kevin F. McCarthy in *A Portrait of the Visual Arts* states that this shift in attention is evident in the decision taken by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, when the museums decide to remove the “plaster cast reproductions of famous works that they had previously collected assiduously in favor of original works” (10). It is this concern of aesthetic purity based on the uniqueness and utility of art objects that created the hierarchy of value in the visual arts during the twentieth century. The same is found expression in Jane Urquhart’s *The Underpainter* where Austin Fraser, a renowned minimalist painter, looks down upon George Kearns, a porcelain artist. Since the day Austin met George Kearns and learned about his inclination towards porcelain art, Austin Fraser never missed a chance to make George realise the insignificance of his days he spent on contemplating the porcelain art. One day, when George tells Austin about a

woman who has spent/dedicated her whole life painting beavers on soap dishes, Austin laughs at it as if he never comes across such foolishness. The whole collection of China in George Kerans' shop gave Austin a look as if "George's was a toy country; one to be played in, and played with, but one to be locked away with the dolls when you reached a certain age" (Urquhart 75).

The porcelain factory, as it is mentioned in *The Underpainter* ceased to work when the war between Britain and Germany was declared in 1915, and the Kearns' family that had supplied China/porcelain for over 60 years to the town of Davenport had to stop its business as George Kearns left for France to join the battle. This war not only smashes the utility and uniqueness of porcelain but somehow makes the twentieth-century generation realise that whatever is beautiful and fragile would not survive the time to come. Talking about the effects of war on kitchen china, George tells Austin that there is not so much call for his things as it is before the wars because "the war finishes them off altogether" (190). Like this, there are a number of evidences in the novel that proves that the two World Wars not only affected porcelain art badly but also put it in a questionable taste. Mrs. Boyle's attitude towards kitchen china in the novel, as well as the sales girls' reaction when Austin Fraser comes to buy the wire contraption in the merchandise shop for china collection throws light on the place porcelain art objects occupy after the two World Wars. While remembering the sales girls' bewilderment, Austin says "As I pick my way through the merchandise, the salesgirls eye me suspiciously and are only very occasionally able to supply the required object" (128). When Austin asks for the things belong to kitchen china, the sale girls in the shop give Austin a look as if he wants to buy something out of the world. Porcelain, that was always known and valued for its delicacy and durability, has lost its charm and demand amid the chaos of war casualties and turns it as a commodity that people have no time to deal with.

“European and American Art after World War II” mentions that the artists who were involved in the new art movements during the ‘First World War’ moved their artistic activities to the United States during the ‘World War II’ to avoid the ravages of the war. It is after the ‘World War II’ and the positive turn in America’s economic fortune, museums were expanded up around the country with the help of private and public support. The collapse of the European art world during World War II worked as a boon for the American visual arts. To avoid the casualties of the war, many leading European artists, experts, collectors, and dealers have shifted their artistic activities to America (1). This confluence of European and American art not only stimulated the educational level and art appreciation among the American public but also brought change in the preferences of American arts’ institutes. The shift in the inclination in the world of art and institutes finds space in Urquhart’s *The Underpainter*, when Austin Fraser says, “[...] a series of ostensibly mystical cubist paintings that have now, mercifully, all but disappeared from the face of the earth” (268). Austin Fraser, who was earlier influenced by the cubist art movement and has attempted one or two cubist nudes, appears eager to dispose his collection of cubist paintings when cubist art has started losing its appeal in the art market. The cubist art, which is in demand before the arrival of European artists in America, began to lose its firm ground in the world of visual art during the World War II. Those artists, who stoke up their collection of cubist paintings, waiting for the right time to exhibit them, suddenly seem hurried to sell their paintings, instead of their lingering admiration for them.

Following the need of the time, the arts’ institutes have categorised art objects into three in the following way: “at the bottom of which are objects that are both useful and can exist in limitless quantities (e.g., the decorative arts); in the middle are objects that are unique but are also useful (e.g., crafts); at the top are objects that are both unique and useless (e.g., painting and sculpture)” (McCarthy 10). The categorisation of art objects made museums a

place of high culture and associated it with the elite both as patrons and as visitors. One can trace the roots of a dominance of these art institutes' back in the 18th and 19th Europe – especially in France, that was followed by Americans in the distinctly American style in the early twentieth century. McCarthy in *A Portrait of the Visual Arts* mentions that it is in the 1870s that the major art museums were founded in New York such as “(The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Boston (the Museum of Fine Arts), Philadelphia (the Philadelphia Museum of Art), and Chicago (the Art Institute) that were dedicated exclusively to the fine arts” (McCarthy 10).

The desperation among artists to belong to these art institutes' and thus to establish them in the world of art was at its peak in the twentieth century. Modern artists like Robert Henri, as it is referred to in *The Underpainter*, burst into the art studios of America to preach the idea of visual art that was new to them. “Robert Henri, returned to America from France[...] burst into the studios of New York City, preaching the idea of visual art as a response to the life and [...] shouting the names Renoir, Cezanne, Pissarro as if they were vegetables he was desperately trying to sell at market” (Urquhart 17). Introducing the styles of French art in America, Robert Henri, a world leader in the visual arts, not only gave a new shape to American art but also embedded his name in the history of American art. Calling Henri a capitalist in *The Underpainter*, Rockwell Kent says, “I have to keep a closer eye on Robert, make sure he's not filling you kids up with too much crap” (139). For Rockwell, art comes naturally to an artist. It is not a thing that has to be instructed to by others. In the eyes of Rockwell, Robert Henri spoiled the young generation by instructing them what to do and how to do.

Austin Fraser, an art student of Robert Henri, being a part of that age and a follower of the traditions of the art world, joined the classes at the Rochester Art Institutes and developed the friendship with the elite class of his city, Rochester. Being born at the tail end

of the nineteenth century, Austin Fraser witnessed the finale of every art form he encountered that not only affects his art style but makes him an artist of transition age where visual arts seem to take a completely new shape. While remembering the earlier days of his artistic career, Austin says, “I was experimenting with visual intimacy, moving the object closer and closer until proximity obliterated meaning” (Urquhart 54). This line from *The Underpainter* not only reflects the innovative spirit of an artist of that time but also throws light on the necessity of an artist to establish him in the world of art by maximising his potential by engaging in varied artistic strategies. As it is pointed out by Barbara Rosenblum in “The Artist as Economic Actor in the Art Market,” that by allocating the reward from the art market an artist has not to be solely based on the intrinsic value of the art objects but has to imply extra aesthetic criteria (66).

Reflecting on the functioning of art markets, Rosenblum mentions that art markets are generally considered an ‘oddball’ markets by the economists because they do not operate the way normal markets work. Here, each art objects has its own market, having its own collection of supply and demand. She says, “[it] consists of unique and noncomparable items, the assumptions of comparability, substitutability, and complementarity cannot be met” (64). The same is depicted in *The Underpainter* when George Kearns tells Austin about the objects that are more saleable as compared to other art objects. He says, “[...] they had sold so rapidly to the Americans who were in town for the summer that the ink pot was the last of the batch. At first he didn’t want me to have it, it being “purely commercial”” (92). Kearns tells Austin that the art objects that depict the well-known places/views in Canada like Davenport’s “Victoria Hall” sold more quickly as compared to the objects which depict the ordinary landscapes scenes of Canada.

Besides the commercialisation of the art objects, it is the pluralisation of arts discourse as well as the system of guilds and academies in the distribution of art’s works that paved the

way for the exceptional artistic diversity. It has not only expanded the art market but has segmented it variedly. This pluralisation of arts discourse is illustrated by Jane Urquhart in *The Underpainter* by employing the different art theories of modern American artists such as Robert Henri and Rockwell Kent. In the novel, Austin Fraser not only seems to be influenced by the art theories of Robert Henri and Rockwell Kent but also appears to have invented his own art theories by keeping in mind the theories of renowned artists whose influences in his life and in the world of art are remarkable. Austin says, "I even began to develop certain theories of association" (101).

Coincidentally, it was the time when the foundation of modernism started gaining equal ascendancy in American art in the form of various style and art movements. Barbara Rosenblum in "The Artist as Economic Actor in the Art Market" mentions that arts' markets have begun to prosper exceptionally as the very wealthy industrialist became interested in art and have joined the museum's boards. This is the case in *The Underpainter* as well when Austin's father, a wealthy industrialist, spends his non-business hours occupied with the things he is interested in. Austin says, "He spent his days in the offices of brokers and promoters [...] his non-business hours became filled with the committee work relating to hospitals and museums" (42). At that time, as it is in the present scenario, wealthy people have been willing to spend their wealth in acquiring the art objects that seem to fulfill their standards. And, it is in the following years that art markets in America and in parts of Europe grew in volume to fulfill this procuring urge.

This covetousness not only swells the individuals and the museum's collections but make art itself a commodity. McCarthy says, "Like any other marketplace, the arts market has developed in fits and starts responding to cycles in the accumulation of wealth, political circumstances, and phases of discovery and innovation in art itself" (14). Austin himself, in *The Underpainter*, seems to respond to the cycle of wealth, power and taste by making the

works of art liked by the public most, instead of painting the works he really wants to do. Austin says, “Wealthy New Yorkers, it turned out, loved wilderness landscapes. They wanted rocks and water, twisted tress and muskeg on their smooth plastered wall” (Urquhart 96). This process not only has changed the way the world of art works but also has transformed art “from being about something to being for somebody” (qtd in McCarthy 11).

If we talk about the development of the art markets in the present scenario, it is no longer required the stamp of museums in setting trends or to command a price in the art market. Now, it is dominated by those the dealers and collectors who divide the world of art into the connoisseurs, aestheticians, and critics. Rosenblum believes that “Collectors view the dealer much like a stockbroker, telling the dealer whom and what to buy and sell” (72). As evident in *The Underpainter* where collectors push the art dealers to purchase the cubist paintings of Austin Fraser, which is no longer in demand and which Austin wants to dispose of as soon as possible. Austin says, “[...] my dealer having been instructed to purchase them for me if ever they appeared at auction” (268). In this way, collectors through their entrepreneurial skills not only obtain the recognition for the artist but also set the stage for the price. Throughout the novel, Austin works in the winter season to impress his art dealers to get promotion in his artistic career. Austin says, “I can only call the promotion of my own career, in submitting my works to juried exhibitions, encouraging my dealer” (254). This conflux of marketing and aesthetics in *The Underpainter* depicts the compromising nature of the present art world, which put the economy at the center, by pushing aesthetics at the corner. Here, artists no longer remain the mere producers of goods but have entered the world of art markets, which not only required and demanded the commodification of art objects but the commodification of artists as well.

Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez in *Art and Society* says that art seems to develop/flourish at its highest point under the command of capitalism. The birth of new art forms like films,

applied art, graphic designs etc. would appear possible only under the influence of capitalism, which introduces scientific and technical advancement to the world. Although artistic productions have been subjected to the laws of material production under the hostile environment of capitalism, nevertheless, there are some artistic forms such as paintings, sculptures, dance, etc. which suffered less under the hostility of capitalism. Vasquez says:

Some arts suffer the hostility of capitalism to a greater degree than others, but this means that capitalism is more interested in subjecting some arts to its laws than others [...]. Moreover, from the perspective of capitalist production, it is always more profitable to invest in the production of a film than in publishing a book of poems. (219)

The hostility that appears to be nurtured at the heart of capitalism has never been successful to impose itself completely on the world of art. Aesthetic and modernist art movements of the early twentieth century, that were against the officials and challenged the academic paintings of the nineteenth century, concretely prove the incapability of capitalism to control the development of art entirely. Although the drive to get fame and recognition in the world of art lured many artists of every century and subjected their works of art to the material production, every century carries certain evidences that prove that not every artist stakes his works of art for the sake of material recognition. They struggle throughout their life to prove the worth of real art's works, which are beyond the influences of any authorities as Rockwell Kent and Abbott Thayer seem to do in Urquhart's *The Underpainter*. They not only seem to deny their involvement in the authorities' unjust juries but stir the world of art with their boundless energy by opening up the shows which aim to give equal opportunity to every artist. So, it is suffice to say that although market has played a significant role in making art a normalised aspect of everyday life, it is one of the factors. Other factor are, as has been mentioned earlier, the migration of many European artists to America during the World War

II, the proliferation of the print media, and the categorisation of art objects and assigning each art objects its own market that brought politics in the realm of art. Urquhart's *The Underpainter* depicts the plight of the protagonist Austin Fraser, who is forced to succumb to the pressures of the art market and moves along with the trend of the time, and later subsequently gets disappointed. The depth of his disappointment is portrayed through his opinion of other artists like Rockwell Kent, who does not let his works get tainted under the pressure of economy/market, despite the hardships he has experienced. Austin Fraser sadly thinks that artists like Rockwell Kent whose unflagging belief and contribution in the world of art have sustained the aura/authenticity of visual arts under the hostile environment of capitalism are better. Austin Fraser realises at the end that "the artistic spirit" and the yearning of an artist will never go par with the taste of the consumerist culture and capitalist economy. In this sense, the novel upholds the view that artists may be lured by the market economy of the period, but they never get the kind of satisfaction they envisage when they let themselves and their artistic spirit be controlled by the institutions of the society.

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